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ABSTRACT

The efforts of an urban middle school to involve parents in the functioning of the school by employing two parent representatives in an on-site parent center were studied. The school demonstrated its commitment to parent involvement by setting aside a classroom as a parent center and staffing it with two parent representatives, one African American and one Latina. Field notes from parent meetings and interviews with seven parents, the two parent representatives, four administrators, and the parenting class teacher also provided information about the program. Some rewarding interactions did occur between parents and educators at this school, but they were limited by a variety of factors and actually involved relatively few parents. The seeds for democratic participation were planted by the diversity of the participating parents, the inclusive style of the parenting class, and the exposure of parents to the sociocultural knowledge of schooling that was transmitted in parent meetings. Overall, however, parents were not supported in gaining participation skills or opportunities to organize their own efforts. Data seem to reveal clearly that parental involvement in urban communities needs scaffolded support. Participation skills should be modeled for parents by peers who engage them in horizontal relations that allow them to learn without fear of being silenced, alienated, or embarrassed. (Contains 30 references.) (SLD)

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THE NEED FOR SCAFFOLDING PARENT SUPPORT IN AN URBAN SCHOOL

By

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INTRODUCTION

Nationwide, our central cities[1] are characterized by complex problems of poverty, limited access to health care, high drop out rates and crime. Recognizing that schools working in isolation from the community can not overcome these complex urban problems, some urban schools are becoming community centers, nurturing collaborative relationships between the institution and the surrounding populace, and parents in particular. This collaboration enables the school to share community-building responsibility with its residents and, by doing so, gives community members more possibilities to improve their lives.

This paper is derived from my dissertation, which investigated the ways in which members of an urban middle school, McKay Middle School[2], and the surrounding neighborhood worked together to develop a greater sense of community. Specifically, it focused on the degree to which they engaged each other democratically in this task, and the factors that created opportunities for community building as well as those that presented obstacles.

For this paper, I examine one aspect of the community building effort, McKay Middle School's efforts to involve parents in the functioning of the school by employing two parent representatives in an on-site parent center. Although there is an abundance of literature extolling the virtues of parent involvement, much of it was not conducted in central city schools and does not acknowledge the complexity of involving poor parents of color in urban schools. This paper adds to our understanding of the complexity of this task. It reveals that parents' will and the existence of a parent center are insufficient to nurture a strong reciprocal relationship between parents and the school. Despite, the high level of commitment from the parent representatives and involved parents, a lack of administrative capacity and will left the school facing many stumbling blocks in their

[1]I have chosen to use the term "central city" instead of "inner city" because of the negative connotations that "inner city" has acquired and the faulty assumptions that the term tends to elicit.

attempts to involve the larger parent community in substantive ways. One section in this paper documents the efforts made to support parent learning and development. A second section analyses the challenges to parent participation at McKay. First, I situate the study within its theoretical framework and describe the methods used.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because much of the parent involvement literature focuses on advocating the advantages of parental participation and was not conducted in central city schools, I turned to democracy theories, social capital theory, the caring schools literature and Bourdieu's field theory to provide a theoretical framework which illuminate the potential for democratic relations between parents and schools in urban communities. I use these various theories as different lenses through which to examine parent involvement at McKay.

Stimulating Democratic Participation

Democratic theory provided a framework for the ideals of democratic school/community engagement. In examining how school and community people came together, participatory democracy theory developed my understanding of the importance of grass roots participation. This theory allowed me to examine the degree to which participation stimulated social ties, civic virtue, and transferable participation skills. The democratic participation literature suggests that democratic participation can increase citizens' sense of belonging to their community and help them develop "weak ties" to other community members (Granovetter, 1973; Pateman, 1970). This sense of belonging and the development of social networks can foster a concern for others--civic virtue (Alinsky, 1969; Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970). Participatory democracy theorists also suggest that democratic interactions can provide citizens with transferable participation skills (Cole, 1920; Mill, 1963; Pateman, 1970). However, these theorists assert that "strong democracy" requires deliberation that can grow out of conflict and endure (Barber, 1984; Gutmann, 1987).

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[2] All school and personnel names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Theories of deliberation enabled me to examine the quality of conversations in my study, paying specific attention to peoples' ability to honor different points of view and to allow for discussion of them. For truly democratic deliberation to occur in schools, Sirotnik and Oakes (1990) suggest, following Habermas' notions of public space, that it include certain components: a comprehensible language, sincerity, and justifiability. In such deliberations, all participants can initiate deliberation and all voices are heard (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986).

Nurturing a Climate of Enablement

Both social capital theory and the caring schools literature help structure an analysis of the nature of relationships, the crucial component of community building. Social capital theory provided a theoretical construct by which to assess the school's success in creating an environment that enabled community members rather than merely servicing them. This theory guided my investigation of the degree to which all participants were valued equally and the extent to which relationships based on trust and generalized reciprocity were fostered. Social capital theory has provided the theoretical structure for the examination of the relational aspect of nurturing participation (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Putnam, 1993). Social capital refers to the features of social organization, like trust, common beliefs, and social networks, which can facilitate social action. The development of trust between participants can lead to expanded social networks. Horizontal relations allow all participants to be valued and participate in ways most beneficial to them (Cole, 1918; Effrat, 1974; Putnam, 1993). This contrasts with vertical relations which link unequal agents in asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependence (Putnam, 1993). To the degree that horizontal relations are possible, social capital is nurtured.

The caring schools literature helped me look more concretely at the way the school engaged in relationship-building with its community. The notion of caring schools and communities, as advanced in the literature, provides a model of schools that draws strength from the social capital they nurture with their community. By applying the caring schools

literature beyond school's boundaries, I draw on the key elements of caring schools--human growth, empathy, responsibility and continuity--to better support school/community relations (Acker, 1995; Ayers, 1996; Beck, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Mitchell, 1990a, 1990b; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Ryan and Friedlaender, 1996). The four constructs of caring permitted me to examine the ways that school/community relations were enabling, including the strength and constancy of the school/community relationship and the degree that the community was able to fully engage in a relationship with the school.

The Factors That Facilitate and Restrict Community-Building

As I studied the nature of relationship-building, the tensions that arose provided me with valuable insight into the barriers faced and the ways in which the relationships were negotiated. Efforts to foster democratic participation and create a climate of enablement, inevitably will be both eased and hindered by contextual factors. Bourdieu's field theory as elaborated by DiMaggio (1979), illustrates arenas of tensions that may occur as school and community people join together. Bourdieu sees the social system as made up of autonomous fields founded on hierarchies, which are each arenas of conflict (DiMaggio, 1979). These fields, in the case of this study consist of the school and parent communities. The fields or institutions are structured by their own histories, internal logic and patterns of recruitment and rewards as well as by external demands. Bourdieu specifies that conflicts are likely to occur within political, economic, cultural and symbolic arenas. Bourdieu attests that individuals act in purposeful, reasoning, and self-interested ways to pursue their own subjective ends, actions which serve to unwittingly maintain the hierarchy of structures (DiMaggio, 1979).

An analysis of the data collected at McKay reveals that the literature reflects an ideal far from the reality of the school. Nurturing democratic participation between school and community people in the central city remains tremendously challenging. Moving school people and community members from a point of little democratic participation to an integrated system of democratic participation requires not only intent but capacity. The

investigation of the parent center permits me to articulate some of the central challenges encountered at McKay and to discuss the policy implications of those findings with the hope of reducing the overwhelming nature of these challenges for other schools.

METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered from a one year, doctoral study of McKay Middle School, in Watts, California. A middle school was chosen because secondary schools prove a greater challenge to parent involvement and are less frequently studied than elementary schools. This school was also selected because of its central city location, which is important because of the lack of research on the complexity of involving parents in urban schools. In addition to the challenges of involving poor, undereducated parents, Watts' demographic shift added cultural and political complexities as this once African American community was becoming increasingly Latino. The school demonstrated some commitment to parent involvement by setting aside one classroom as a parent center and staffing it with two parent representatives, one African American and the other Latina.

I used case study design since it facilitates the study of a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life-context (Yin, 1989). Case study methods allowed me to achieve understanding by documenting practices and by considering the local meaning that things have for different people (Merriam, 1988). I used purposive sampling (Chein, 1981; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), the sample from which one can learn the most, and interviewed and observed parents, administrators, support staff, and teachers. Through observations of meetings, semi-structured interviews with active school and community participants and collection of relevant documents; I was able to analyze the details of daily life to see a cohesive picture of the complexity of involving parents in the life of the school.

I took detailed field notes from approximately 15 parent meetings including parenting classes and Title I Advisory Council meetings held at the parent center. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 7 parents, 2 parent representatives, 4 administrators, and the parenting class teacher. The interviews were transcribed, coded

and analyzed for their relevance to issues of parent involvement. Relevant documents were collected and analyzed.

IN THE HEART OF WATTS

McKay Middle School is located in Watts, California. Watts, a central city community in the Los Angeles metropolitan area is stigmatized as being violent, poor and hopeless. One community resident explained: "When you are growing up in Watts and tell people where you are from, they say where is your Uzi and your tattoo? I have lived with that all my life." While Watts is very poor community,[3] with the densest population of housing project residents in Los Angeles County, it also has signs of entreprenurship and public and private investment. For example, residents create open air markets on empty street corners, and there is a new library and post office, a small shopping center, a health clinic and a community center in the community. Watts was also undergoing a dramatic demographic shift from majority African American to majority Latino.

McKay Middle School is located in the center of this community and draws students from three of the four housing projects in the community. The school is part of the Los Angeles Unified School District which exerts considerable pressure on but provides little support to site administrators to boost low test scores and attendance rates. The district was also engaged in the LEARN school reform effort to institute site-base management and increase community control of schools. McKay teachers resisted this reform for several years before voting it in. McKay's principal Mr. Jones worked in the district for 35 years and retired at the end of this study. He had high staff turnover and faced teacher alienation and cynicism from teachers who felt powerless in the large district. McKay served 1600 students who were 60% Latino and 40% African American. The school struggled to accommodate the changing demographics. They had only two Latino

[3] In 1996 the median household income was $25,000 with 43% of the residents over the age of 16 unemployed. For the residents over 25 years old, 25% had completed an elementary education, 25% had attended some high school (National Decision Systems, a division of Equifax Marketing Decision Systems, Inc.)

only two Latino staff members, and three credentialed bilingual teachers. In addition, no one in the front office or attendance office spoke Spanish.

In an effort to include parents, McKay started a parent center on campus. They staffed it with two parent representatives, who were purposely chosen as ethnically representative of the Latino and African American school population. One parent representative, Selma Lamont, a young African American grandmother, who had been involved with the school for decades was disliked by many for her combative manner. The other parent representative, Sara Saucedo, a Latina mother, worked hard to make the parent center a home-like safe place for Latino parents. The parent center was managed by the Title I coordinator, In the year of this study, the Title I coordinator, a strong community leader, nicknamed "the mayor" became very ill and took a leave of absence. Several months passed before a new Title I coordinator was appointed. The new coordinator, Ms Nichols, complained to the principal that both parent representatives were illiterate and not working hard enough. The truth of her claim is unclear, however. Neither parent representative received much training by the district and virtually no support or guidance from either the Title I coordinator or any other school administrator. The parent center was used by a small cadre of mostly Latino parents and a few African American grandmothers and mothers for Title I parent advisory council meetings, parenting classes, and as an informal meeting place.

PARENTAL DEVELOPMENT

The Parent Center provided opportunities for community revitalization activities and for parents' personal development, however it lacked the skilled parent leadership to give it direction and to build solidarity. At McKay, parent meetings, parenting classes, and parent representative Ms. Saucedo herself—to the extent of her capacity—provided parents with development opportunities in parenting skills, work skills, and information about the school and its programs. This gave parents important information and provided some basis for understanding the ways in which the school functioned. However, since they used

one-way learning—from school to parent—these efforts preserved the vertical relations between home and school. Parental development in the areas of coalition-building and deliberation skills, that were lacking at McKay, would have provided opportunities to reduce power inequities and to allow two-way learning to occur between parents and educators. This could strengthen both educators and parents and contribute to the building of community.

Existing Parental Learning at the Center

The Parent Center was designed to function as a site for parental development and participation. Activities there provided opportunities for parents' personal growth as they gained important socio-cultural knowledge about schooling, learned some skills of participation, and were given community improvement opportunities.

Stimulating Community Involvement and Revitalization. The Parent Center served to connect parents to activities in their community, which had the potential for stimulating their own personal growth and the development of social networks. At Title I Advisory meetings parents learned about community organizations and about ways to become involved with them outside of the school. Parent representative Ms. Saucedo also distributed information about a special program enabling immigrants to obtain a social security number, and she gave an invitation to residents of the four local housing projects to participate in job training.

Parents were also encouraged to participate in activities to revitalize their community, which were sponsored by public and community organizations. This stimulated civic virtue. For example, the first Title I coordinator, Mr. Clayton distributed a City of Los Angeles-sponsored Needs Assessment questionnaire and encouraged parents to complete it. He stressed that "the money is coming into the community, but it is being planned by people who don't necessarily know the community. This is an opportunity for you to have input and shape the development of the community." He also distributed an

invitation to a town hall meeting to be held in the school's auditorium and sponsored by their city councilman.

Mr. Clayton and the parent representatives invited parents to community-initiated activities such as an ethnic conflict resolution meeting, a candlelight vigil to protest the U.S. government's role in inner-city drug trafficking, and a rally against the unsafe practices of a local chemical company. Although most of these activities were sponsored by African American organizations and politicians, Latinos were explicitly encouraged to participate, again providing horizontal links between ethnic groups. When parent-initiated, they also reflected collaborative actions and opportunities.

Opportunities for Developing Parenting Skills. The Parent Center facilitated parents' personal development and learning. The monthly, morning parenting classes were attended by ten to twenty parents, and covered topics such as following directions, cultural awareness, family math, and career awareness. Despite the didactic and deficiency-oriented overtone that these parenting classes frequently send, the small size of the group and the skillfulness of the teacher, Helen Mouton, allowed these classes to function with evidence of real democratic deliberation and horizontal relations. Ms. Mouton conveyed to parents that the parenting class was a place to feel safe, to laugh, and to learn. As a resident of a neighboring community, she frequently took the opportunity to relate stories from her own life, illustrating the similarities between her experiences and those of other parents. This helped create trust and develop horizontal relations between all participants. Her six years of leading the parenting classes at McKay provided continuity in the community; she knew many of the African American grandmothers with whom she had been working for years.

Ms. Mouton always began class by asking parents to share their own experiences. In this way she demonstrated that she valued everyone's background and knowledge. In one family math class she asked parents to share how they taught their children the value of money.

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Ms. Mouton: It is important for kids to learn the value of money. How many have said to your kids, "You think money grows on trees?"

(parents laugh and nod their heads)

Latina parent: I tell my kids I am the boss. They do work at home and they get paid. My son wanted a little radio but he couldn't afford it. I had him work at home to buy it.

African American parent: I don't give my kids everything they want.

Mouton: Sara, translate that, I want to see how parents react to that.

(translated, Latina parents agree)

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The nature of Ms. Mouton's support developed parents' positive feelings about their parenting methods and skills. She was careful to include English-and Spanish-speaking members of the class by having the comments translated promptly, and by encouraging everyone to participate.

When conflicts between parents occurred, Ms. Mouton made it possible for parents to discuss their differences. In an interview she articulated her philosophy, which embodied notions of democratic deliberation:

> ...you let everybody know that what everybody has to say is important. Then you try to create a spirit where everyone will listen to everyone.... In my experience, after you let them know that everybody is important, and everybody has something to stay that is good, and what we do is put everything out on the table and we'll see what we can do with it. I've never had arguments where parents left mad and upset with each other.

Ms. Mouton also encouraged the parents themselves to teach their children in their everyday lives. She suggested they talk about math as they shop and cook with their children. At a class in following directions she urged them to read with their children, talk with them, and help them develop critical thinking skills,. She provided parents with specific activities. For example, she told them:

> If you are watching a TV show, turn it off and get them to remember what the problem was on the show, what was the solution, what steps did they take to reach the solution, and think about the character development. Use critical thinking ask them, "What would you have done differently as that character?" This is a good way to measure a child's values that you have determined like, respect, tolerance, love, patience, honesty, courteousness.

Opportunities for Gaining Socio-Cultural Knowledge of Schools. The Parent Center provided Latino parents, who had little experience or comfort with a formal educational setting, with some socio-cultural knowledge of schooling. Assorted information about the school was given at the monthly Title I Parent Advisory meetings attended by 20 - 40 parents. There were flyers on various school and after school programs, left-over copies of bulletins listing important dates, the Title I meeting agenda and budget, and items such as an explanation of the district truancy ordinance.

Parent representative Ms. Saucedo proved especially instrumental in assisting parents in their quest for knowledge. First informing herself, she tried to transmit all she learned to her cadre of Latino parent volunteers, bringing back material from district meetings she attended. Her contributions gave parents more than just the opportunity to learn new facts; she stimulated them to discuss new ideas. As one Latina parent recounted: "Sometimes when Sara brings stuff back from workshops she attends, she brings activities for us to engage in and to learn something new. And the parents are very happy when they get to work on such stuff."

Aracely Juarez explained that Ms. Saucedo also trained parents to use some of the equipment at school. "There are sewing machines, there are typewriters. They have everything to make photocopies. They can use that machine, because it is for them, the parents." She went on to explain that when she began volunteering she did not know how to write, and Sara helped her learn how to sign her name.

Ms. Saucedo helped parents learn how to interact effectively with the school and the students. She encouraged parents to talk with teachers and to take responsibility for their children by participating more. As she recounted:

> I have ten parents that go, "No I don't want to get involved, because they [teachers] are already the experts, and they know what they are doing." And they go, "That's why I don't want to get involved in school, that's why I don't want to talk to the teacher." Like I keep telling them, "Sometimes experts make mistakes, too." I say, "Not all the time they are going to do the correct thing."

She frequently accompanied a concerned parent to an administrator and teacher and translated for them.

These examples illustrate how Sara modeled collaboration, fostering trust among parents. Her willingness to help other parents with the expectation that eventually they would help her was an illustration of the kind of generalized reciprocity that social capital theorists advocate (Putnam, 1993).

The Continuing Need for Building Participation Skills

Democratic theory suggests community participation increases citizens' sense of belonging and stimulates the formation of communal bonds and trust (Alinsky, 1969; Granovetter, 1973; Pateman, 1970). Likewise, some theorists suggests that parent involvement will be most effective when it is led by parents. They claim that it is parents who are most in touch with each others' needs and can most effectively mobilize each other (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Gandara, 1989; Merz & Furman, 1997). However, some of these theorists fail to address the difficulties of poor, unskilled parents mobilizing and leading others like themselves. As the study found, most parents involved at McKay lacked these skills. Many Latina mothers felt shy about expressing their concerns, while some African American mothers used combative, unproductive approaches.

The Problems with Unskilled Parent Leadership. The school made a commitment to hire parent representatives who were community members and who were representative of its ethnic population. However, the individuals employed in these jobs in large part lacked the skills necessary to organize parents, foster a sense of solidarity, and integrate the Parent Center into the functioning of the school. Nevertheless, the administrators expected these parent representatives to take the initiative and use skills that they did not have to run the Parent Center effectively. This was despite the fact that the only training available to the representatives was a monthly district-sponsored meeting. Ironically, the administrators understood that parents needed training; to parents who were interested in volunteering they offered the training and the opportunity to work in the front office, supervise the

grounds, and help in the classroom. But, they did not recognize the need to provide school-based training for their paid parent workers. As a result, beyond what these individuals had learned from their long stints as volunteers, the paid parent representatives did not have much more knowledge and skills than other parents. Ms. Saucedo and Ms. Lamont received little guidance from either the administrators or the Title I coordinator, leaving them struggling in leadership roles. For example, although Ms. Saucedo eagerly volunteered to serve as PTA president, no meetings or activities occurred because she was not aware it was her responsibility to schedule them.

An Absence of Solidarity. Ms. Saucedo and Ms. Lamont did not know how to create a sense of communal power among parents. Their poor leadership and organizing skills resulted in a lack of solidarity among parents. Although Ms. Saucedo walked parents to the main office or to teachers' rooms to help them voice their concerns, she did not know how to gather parents together to express their concerns communally either to each other or to the administration. Furthermore, Ms. Lamont's manner alienated parents.

Parents' inability to organize themselves left them defending their concerns individually. Parent Nubia Ortiz related one incident that happened at a parent meeting: After expressing her concern that teachers had sent parent notices home too late, she was questioned by an administrator about the appropriateness of the meeting as a place to voice her concern. She explained:

> And I tried to bring it up at one of the meetings and the [administrator] told me, "If you have something personal that you want to talk about, make an appointment to talk to me."... Since I'm the one that speaks up the most, the other mothers tell me, "Please, tell her this and that."...And I made the appointment and I went to the meeting and I said to the [administrator], "I'm representing the parents"... [and she replied] "But those parents have to come talk to me."

In this interaction the administrator individualized Ms. Ortiz' concern by labeling it "personal" and inappropriate at a public meeting. She thus created a no-win situation for all parents, since any issue they raised would likely stem from a personal incident, and therefore none would be deemed suitable for public discourse. This strategy in effect barred parents from any public discussion. The administrator—perhaps unwittingly—

demoted Ms. Ortiz' attempt to express the shared concern of many parents to the status of a personal issue, reducing parental solidarity and power.

Despite such negative experiences, parents struggled to obtain the skills necessary to make their voices heard by administrators. They sought guidance in learning how to ensure that administrators would listen to them and value their opinions. As parent Aracely Juarez explained, "We need a teacher to guide us. It seems to me that they [parents] want direction from a teacher and not from other parents like them." Ms. Juarez articulated the perception that the parent representatives did not possess these skills or the ability to exert their power with administrators. As a result, parents felt they could only gain a voice by adopting a school staff member as their spokesperson. However, this kept the relations between parents and administrators vertically structured.

Who Should Lead? New Title I Coordinator Ms. Nichols' awareness of the parent representatives' lack of skills led her to question their suitability for the positions they held. She told me, "I have already let both [parent representatives] know that I won't fund those positions for people that don't do the work." This comment revealed her belief that they had the capacity but not the will to do the work. She also questioned their literacy skills. I believe that the problem clearly was a lack of skills and access to training rather than an unwillingness to work, as I witnessed both of them working long hours.

Ms. Nichols accused Mr. Jones, the principal, of apathy when he refused to withdraw their appointments. Perhaps Mr. Jones realized what Ms. Nichols seemed unaware of—that despite their low literacy and poor organizing skills, these woman established trusting relations with parents. Ms. Saucedo, especially, formed strong bonds with parents and probably served as their primary reason for volunteering at the school. Firing her would likely violate the trust of many parents, discouraging them from future participation. Even Ms. Lamont, disliked by some, had strong positive relationships with the high-status African American grandmothers. A loss of their support would likely reverberate throughout the community, damaging the school's reputation.

A Lack of Direction. The inadequate guidance that the parent representatives were able to provide for parents contributed to parents' reluctance to become involved. They were left unsure of how and where to participate, and they wanted more guidance about how they could contribute. Mother Aracely Juarez admitted that when Latino parents sensed that a teacher treated their child unfairly, they did not know how to get help in approaching the principal: "We don't know who we can tell...I believe all the parents have to be present when they go to talk to the principal." Latina mothers cited their shyness as inhibiting their seeking help to resolve their problems. Parent Rosalba Menendez' shyness prevented her from coming to campus unless asked by dissatisfied teachers or administrators. She explained: "I don't come or call. I don't do anything. I told you that I'm a bit timid. I only do that when my children, when I got phone calls about my children getting in fights." Parents lacked the skills and confidence to facilitate the kinds of collaborative action that the empowerment model advocates. Democratic deliberation did not come naturally to most parents.

To parents who lacked confidence or the skills to participate in multiple ways, general, unspecific invitations seemed too vague to motivate them. Mother Beverly Carter said:

> They call parents up all the time, but they should have a list of things. They say, "Come up and volunteer, come up and volunteer." All right, come on up and volunteer and do what? You know, what do you want me to do, staple papers? No one has ever called me to say, "Can you come up and assist with Ms. Smith in her classroom?" No one has called and said, "All right, we have a reading group during recess, can you come and help with this reading group during recess?... Or can you help this week? Can you for an hour after school and help in the library, can you come and help put labels on books?..."

The lack of specificity in invitations occurred because the school system did not have clear, established roles for parents, and McKay's staff did not recognize parents' need for such guidance. Administrators did not direct teachers and Parent Center staff to create such opportunities for parents. Not only were teachers not provided with guidance on how to involve parents in their classrooms, they also were not directed to participate in the

Parent Center in any way. One teacher described her interaction with parents in the Parent Center as, "very little; I welcome the parents that come and visit [in my classroom], they seemed pleased by what they see." Her statement illustrates the lack of initiative many teachers took in communicating with parents. In the year I spent at the school, I never witnessed a teacher talking to a parent in the Parent Center. Although aware of its existence, the teachers seemed to view the Parent Center as outside their domain as teachers.

Despite their frustration, a small group of 10 - 20 committed parents kept coming to meetings, volunteering, and speaking to administrators. Many did not give up on the school and refused to give up on their children. Latino parents also continued to rely heavily on Sara Saucedo, who despite her limitations was for them the most receptive school staff member, listening carefully and offering them the best advice she could.

For a handful of parents and grandmothers the Parent Center clearly established a bridge between home and the school community. The strength of the bridge was due to the hard work of parent representative Ms. Saucedo, parenting class leader Ms. Mouton, and the diligence of the involved parents.

However, for parent involvement to grow, to prove more satisfying for parents, and fundamentally to promote improvements at the school, parents needed support in their development of participation skills. McKay parents needed to learn how to work collectively and how to deliberate both among themselves and also with educators. The next section elaborates some of the administrative and structural obstacles to parental participation at McKay.

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

At McKay parents lacked participation skills, and the school did not use the opportunities they had to provide such skills. As a result, substantive parent participation did not occur as frequently as it might have. McKay administrators most frequently supported a traditional model of parent involvement, where parents contribute to school-

initiated activities in proscribed ways. However, even when they did support parent meetings that provided the potential for true deliberation, these activities were tightly controlled and limited, preventing any substantial parent participation. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1981) theorizes on the tendency of schools to rely on safer, more ritualistic parent involvement activities:

> One of the reasons why the struggles over territoriality are rarely articulated, clarified, and resolved is because there are very few opportunities for parents and teachers to come together for meaningful substantive discussion. In fact, schools organize public, ritualistic occasions that rarely allow for real contact, negotiation, or criticism between parents and teachers. Rather, they tend to be institutionalized ways of establishing boundaries between insiders (teachers) and interlopers (parents) under the guise of polite conversation and mature cooperation (Lightfoot, 1981, p. 99).

This section illustrates some of the continuing challenges to democratic parent participation at McKay Middle School. Obstacles resulted from the combined effects of a school system not structured to support substantive parent involvement, a non-interventionist administration, inadequately trained parent representatives, and involved parents struggling to survive within this leadership vacuum. Parents faced obstacles to participation in their interactions with the front office, with administrators, and within the Parent Center. As a result, the administrators of McKay were able to preserve much of their power, sustaining their vertical relations with parents.

A School Preserving Its Power

McKay maintained vertical relations with parents by engaging in outreach efforts that preserved the traditional separation between home and school. The traditional model of parent involvement suggests that parents serve as supporters of the school's agenda and of their individual child's progress. The principal seemed most comfortable with such traditional notions that place the role of parenting and schooling in separate spheres of responsibility. From a cynical perspective, this model keeps parents powerless, while satisfying policy requirements for parent involvement.

Outreach Efforts

The principal Mr. Jones conveyed his traditional perspective in two consecutive monthly parent newsletters, which he concluded with the same sentences:

> Thank you for continuing to work with the school in getting your students to school by 7:50 a.m. daily, in uniform, with their completed homework and with a positive attitude for learning. We'll take it from there!

The sentence "We'll take it from there!" clearly conveyed the message to parents that the school staff did not expect parents' help at school.

Mr. Jones further showed his comfort with the separation of school and home by using traditional outreach mechanisms: newsletters, open houses, parenting classes, and teachers' phone calls home regarding misbehaving students. Although administrators also used less traditional means (e.g., computer classes for parents and Saturday school for parents and children), these again embodied a more traditional model, since they were school initiated. They conveyed to parents their own unimportance in the functioning of the school. As one staff member explained, "They send newsletters, they deal with crisis situations, nothing in between." The principal actually recognized the ineffectiveness of the written word in communicating with many illiterate parents. He explained: "When they send questionnaires home, the answers don't fit the questions. The written word is not that powerful a tool for them [parents]." Despite this awareness, Mr. Jones seemed to lack the will, imagination, capacity, and district support to devise and test alternative communication strategies.

Administrators often structured school initiated activities to involve parents in ways that made participation difficult. At McKay's open house, for example, many teachers followed a school regulation to close and lock their doors, intimidating parents and keeping them from visiting the classrooms. When the administrators invited parents to participate in extra activities like computer classes or Saturday school, they frequently informed parents only one day prior to the beginning of a six-week class. Furthermore, these classes did not provide child care, further preventing many parents from participating. An additional

unfortunate situation that caused parents unending irritation and confusion developed from an automated phone system designed to call parents whose children had been marked absent from their homeroom classes. The system was initially activated during a district testing session, when students taking the test in Spanish were in the library and were consequently marked absent; their parents were called by the new automated system. Not only had school staff not explained the system to parents, but they had set it to begin calling parents at 4:00 am. In these cases administrators absolutely disregarded the effects of their actions on the families. Most significantly, all these efforts exemplify one-way communication systems from the school to the parent. No structures existed that promoted two-way communication or discourse. School staff recognized that the lack of structures for communication was a problem. One staff member explained:

> The parents and the staff they are not getting the equal time to talk to each other, "This is where we are coming from, this is what we like, how can you help us, what can we do to make it easier for parents." So there is no dialogue taking place, so the community doesn't feel like this is a place where they can get much help.

The lack of communication diminished a sense of belonging and trust that parents might otherwise have felt at McKay.

The Push to Individualize Concerns. The absence of structures for discourse and the inability of parents to organize for collective power forced parents to raise concerns on an individual basis as they occurred. Little opportunity existed for parents to present their concerns collectively. On several occasions when a parent attempted to represent other parents' interests, administrators treated their concerns on an individual basis. For example, parent Nubia Ortiz found a lack of administrative support when she expressed some concerns for the way school staff treated children at lunch time. She related the following story:

> I was here every day supervising children during lunch time. I saw school personnel doing a lot of wrong things and I told the principal, and they didn't like the fact that I was here. I was told, "I'm sorry, but if you have some personal issues...." "This is not personal. This affects all children." For instance, school personnel would take children's backpacks, the person who sweeps the school...he would follow the children and would search their bags. One time he followed a

> group of children, they had gotten little bags with peanuts and things like that, he followed them to the bathroom and put his head inside. When the children were inside he yelled, "Hey, you, come over here." I didn't think that was right and I told the woman in charge, but what do you want me to do if they don't listen? So then I told the assistant principal and she questioned me, "Are you sure? Do you have any evidence?"

Ms. Ortiz' story reveals her sense of being unimportant and not respected or valued by school personnel. After the incident Ms. Ortiz felt voiceless in the school, and only reluctantly participated in school activities. This episode also illustrates parents' struggle to nurture a collective voice, to speak on behalf of others. In this case, Ms. Ortiz tried to speak on behalf of other parent's children, only to be told her concern was "personal" or individual. The treatment afforded her and others squelched these parents' efforts to express their civic virtue and reinforced vertical relations between parents and school staff.

Immobilized Administrators. Unfortunately the administrators' lack of connection with parents left them unable to involve themselves more effectively. As an assistant principal said when asked if they could realistically expect to increase parent participation he replied:

> It is possible, but not, I don't think, with those of us who are standing guard right now. Because we've tried, we've tried for ten or twelve years now, at least I have. I have gotten what I've gotten. And it has taken everything I've got to get right here. So maybe a new guard, with new ides and new energies, they might be able to do it. I think I have pretty much played my hand.

Left unsure of how to involve more parents and with no district support, administrators maintained proforma, ineffective methods such as newsletters and open houses. The principal placed heavy responsibility for change on unskilled parents without notifying them of his expectations, suggesting:

> It may be time next year to put another boost in the Parent Center, that maybe there is more they can do. I would like that to come from the parents rather than me or whoever is sitting here to say, "We'd like you to do this, this and this." I am hoping that the parents will realize that maybe they can, now that they are more grounded and there is more of them, and they feel more confident, maybe they can do some other things.

However, without any structures for communication or organizational skills, parents remained powerless to address their concerns or influence the school on any broader scope. Neither administrators nor parents understood how to nurture collaborative deliberation among parents.

Furthermore, the administrators seemed ambivalent at times about involving parents in the school. It remained unclear if administrators genuinely supported parents' active presence on campus or if their statements of support were politically motivated. In the transition between Title I coordinators in the middle of the year, several parent advisory meetings were scheduled during teacher inservice days. This conflict resulted in the cancellation of the parent meetings. Rather than reschedule the meetings, the principal allowed them to lapse. Furthermore, despite espousing all of the politically correct rhetoric about parent involvement, on several occasions the principal told very negative stories about parents whose involvement had harmed the school or school system in some way, among them the story of an angry family who physically attacked a district administrator. His completion of the story by laughing and saying, "That's parent involvement," clearly revealed his ambivalence and lack of confidence in the notion of parent involvement.

The Parent Center as an Island for Parent Involvement

The inaccessibility to parents of other sites in the school, such as the main office, left the Parent Center bearing the burden of parent involvement. The parent representatives worked hard to make the Parent Center a place for parents to feel comfortable and to participate. Ms. Lamont welcomed and chatted with the involved African American grandmothers, with whom she shared a joint history in the community. The deference and respect she showed them contributed to their sense of belonging in the center. Sara Saucedo decorated the room with arts and crafts, some made by parents. She eagerly greeted all parents when they arrived and provided for their needs. For example, during one meeting she provided extra diapers for a parent with a small child. At another meeting, she passed out extra bags of household items, left over from the school's open house. Ms.

Saucedo's enthusiasm for celebrating holidays also made parents feel special as they helped her decorate the room with holiday signs and art work. For Halloween she passed out candy carefully wrapped in Halloween cellophane.

Ms. Saucedo made the Parent Center a safe and welcoming island for Latino parents in an otherwise unfamiliar school. The lack of role definition allowed Ms. Saucedo to veer away from the traditional model of parent involvement. She developed her own ideas about the ways parents could help. For example, her small core group of Latina parents felt so comfortable with her that they came once a week to help her file her paperwork or make phone calls to other parents, inviting them to upcoming meetings. Several other Latina mothers also supervised the side campus gates and frequently checked in with her.

Parents' Desire to Deliberate. Lacking the opportunity and the skills to engage school staff outside of the Parent Center, parents relied on monthly parent meetings to contact administrators. During each parent meeting an administrator presented a particular school program or policy and answered questions about issues such as the uniform policy or a new dismissal procedure. In another meeting, discussions focused on the expanded technology program and collaboration with community agencies. Since these meetings served as most parents' sole contact with administrators, they used these opportunities to ask questions. Their long unaddressed concerns often lead them to barrage the administrator with unrelated questions, often concerning the unsatisfactory treatment their children received from school staff and the violence that their children faced walking home. Parents who redirected the discussion during the meetings were attempting to focus deliberation on issues that concerned them most centrally, rather than on those the school wanted to present. Often in these meetings a struggle between traditional methods and more democratic methods of parent engagement was evident.

However, the traditional methods frequently gained ascendance when the administrators, possessing more power, controlled the direction of the meeting. These

advisory meetings functioned to transmit only school-determined opportunities for parents' development. For example, the assistant principal in charge of technology, Dr. Cooper, invited parents to participate in a six-week Saturday computer class. These computer classes, however, were chosen because of school—rather than parent—determined need.

Parents also used the small windows of opportunity for deliberation in meetings to share information among themselves. For example, at one meeting a long discussion ensued regarding the best places to purchase uniforms inexpensively and how to keep them clean. These discussions fostered "weak ties" and represented the glimmers of hope for more substantive deliberation among parents.

Ritual-Bound Parent Meetings. In parent advisory meetings, however, parents' efforts to deliberate were further stifled by an externally imposed agenda and a ritual-bound facilitator. A prescribed agenda dictated the format of Title I parent advisory meetings, consisting of reports from administrators and a few activist parents. These meetings existed primarily to disseminate information to parents and did not allocate time for public deliberation.

The chairwoman of the Title I Parent Advisory Council, African American community member, Star Porter, presided over the meetings. The lack of administrative supervision allowed this often hostile and rule-bound woman to control the meetings. Her strict adherence to the superficial rituals of meetings and her hostile manner upset and alienated unsophisticated parents. Meetings began when she pulled her gavel out of her purse and banged it on the table, calling the meeting to order. She banged it again for all to rise and recite the pledge of allegiance in English and Spanish and banged it for all to sit. She demanded total control over the meetings, preventing substantive dialogue and horizontal relations between parents. The following exchange illustrates her style:

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Latino Parent: The phone called me to tell me my son had been absent when he wasn't. It made a mistake.

Star Porter: Please direct your questions through me.

(translated)

Latino Parent #2: How will you understand us, you don't speak Spanish?

(translated)

Porter: I do understand it.

Sara Saucedo: You don't need me then.

(Latino parents laugh, Porter looked panicked.)

Porter: I do.

***

This issue brought up by the parent was never resolved because Star Porter derailed the discussion into a debate about protocol. In other cases she used technical language, which alienated and created an artificial hierarchy between parents. The following incident reveals the uselessness of her rigid adherence to meeting protocol.

***

Star Porter: Do we have a quorum? We must have a quorum of "members" to vote to adopt last months' minutes. Ms. Goodman, do we have enough "members" present? Do roll call.

(Roll call done of those in attendance at the previous meeting and present at the current meeting. However, the roll call did not refer to members, since my name was on the list.)

Porter: We do not have enough members, we cannot vote on any issues, nothing is official.

***

In this exchange, Ms. Porter neglected to explain who was a member or the value of voting on previous minutes. As a result of her adherence to protocol, parents could not recommend or adopt any policies. She exercised her power inconsistently, as well. At no other meeting, even those with lower attendance, did she insist on the presence of a quorum to vote.

Her style forced meetings to become exercises in meeting protocol absent of substance. Parent Nubia Ortiz frequently tried to speak out on the behalf of more shy parents. However, at one parent advisory meeting when discussion revolved around

punitive school policies, Ms. Ortiz tried to make a second comment only to be stopped by Ms. Porter warning her, "This is a democratic process; we want to hear from parents who haven't talked yet." Ms. Ortiz explained:

> What happens is that the parents come and they remain quiet because no one lets them talk. I speak up but some people don't let me talk. One lady told, "When I say you can talk then you can talk. We have to allow everyone to talk." But what happens if no one else is speaking up, so I speak up. When I raise questions I noticed that several times parents would say, "I'm so glad you asked that, I wanted to ask that question."

Ms. Ortiz felt controlled and silenced by this incident. Parents, like Ms. Ortiz, felt silenced by the ritualistic nature of advisory meetings. Since the advisory meetings drew the largest numbers of parents, the hostile environment had a particularly devastating impact. This style of meeting directly inhibited democratic deliberation. The jargon-filled language also silenced many. Furthermore, Ms Porter's treatment of Ms. Ortiz indicated a violation of democratic discourse in which each participant's contribution should be valued and considered a legitimate position to hold. It is likely that Ms. Porter feared that allowing Ms. Ortiz the floor would reduce her own control and power over the meeting. This meeting style inhibited most participants from initiating deliberation, and the ritualistic and hierarchical protocol effectively barred horizontal relations and created political tensions.

Unscaffolded Parent Involvement Activities. When the formal meeting agenda did allow for parents to play a more active role, it was in ways that required skills many parents did not possess. Activities designed with middle class parents in mind, such as allocating funds into a budget, do not transfer well to the central city. The following exchange occurred during a Title I Parent Advisory meeting. A description of the events follows:

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The meeting, scheduled to start at 9:00 a.m., sputtered to a start as parents slowly dragged through meeting business. However, no clear purpose existed for this meeting until 10:15, when Ms. Nichols, the Title I coordinator, arrived. By that time 3 Latino parents leave.

Ms. Nichols: Good morning...The budget process has not been what it should have been. It hasn't been for a long time. We had an extra $90,000 that we had to spend in a month or lose it. I will be meeting with the fiscal specialist next week. I want everyone to have a chance to look at the budget. It is not final until then. There are

changes in bilingual funds. We had to allocate 5% for staff development, 5% for instructional materials. That equals $8,000, 10% of the bilingual funds had to be set aside.

(Ms. Nichols asked Sara Saucedo to make copies, while she did, no one translated.)

10:30 (4 Latino parents leave.)

Nichols: I will walk through the budget column by column.... We have to buy supplemental equipment. We are supposed to a have calculators for the Stanford 9 test and we don't; I don't know how they are taking the test.

Latino father: Isn't it better for them to do the work in their head?

Nichols: They should be able to do the calculations already, the calculator enables them to do the computation faster.

African American (A.A.) Parent: I came here to discuss LEARN [Los Angeles School Reform Effort], I want to be involved.

Nichols: We know. We are going to go through the budget first....

A.A. parent: Look at the figure for copy machine, it isn't right. There should be allocation in other budgets to take care of students who are not Title I. We are not school-wide. We are a school-based program...

(Sara doesn't translate, probably doesn't know what "school-wide" jargon means.)

A.A. Parent: On the parent training allowance it used to be $2,000.

11:10 (A discussion just at the African American end of the table continues that is jargonistic and doesn't get translated. Latino parents get up and go to Sara's desk and talk to her. Ms. Nichols continues to talk.)

Star Porter: I want the parents to come back.

Latino Parents: We need to leave, we need to pick up our children. Nothing was being translated.

Nichols: I can't approve the budget unless you come back. You have to come back. (To Sara) If they want to be in on this, they need to ask questions. Sara has to translate.

Porter: Let's schedule another meeting to discuss the budget.

Following this dialogue a long accusatory discussion ensued on possible days for a follow-up meeting. Several times were suggested by Ms. Nichols and Ms. Porter, but most Latina parents were not available because the proposed times were too early or too late and they had to drop off or pick up their younger children. Ms. Nichols and Ms. Porter warned parents that they had to be willing to compromise. However, Ms. Nichols and Ms. Porter refused to compromise by meeting on a Tuesday or Thursday because an involved grandmother, Ms. Andrews had dialysis. The schedule seemed to revolve around Ms. Andrews, even though she did not have any children in the school. Finally Ms. Nichols

scheduled a meeting for May 2nd, despite its falling on the first day of Cinco de Mayo celebrations.

***

The dialogue clearly shows the alienation of some parents throughout the meeting. The parent who came to hear about LEARN never received the information she desired, the parent concerned about the use of calculators was silenced, and for over half of the 37 parents present, Ms. Saucedo was not able to translate most of the meeting. Furthermore, even if she had translated it, it would have remained meaningless to the many parents unfamiliar with budgets. Ms. Nichols did not explain the meaning behind the monetary amounts in the budget. She ran quickly through the budget, with seemingly no awareness that many parents lacked the skills to read a budget, and did not know what the monetary amounts could purchase. At no time during the discussion did she state what a designated amount would purchase, or what amount had been designated in previous years.

In part, this was a structural issue, since the Title I program required parents' involvement, yet provided no training for parents. This approach placed the older African American parents with years of experience making budgets at an advantage, allowing them to ask questions and direct the discussion. Unequal distribution of knowledge created hierarchical relations between parents, erecting a strong barrier to democratic participation. Sara, as parent representative, lacked sufficient knowledge of budgets and of the Title I program to understand the jargonistic language used. This prevented her from translating or explaining the jargon to the Latino parents. The entire experience thus proved particularly frustrating and alienating to the Latino parents, who were virtually shut out of the discussion and then berated for leaving. It deeply eroded their trust in Ms. Nichols, specifically, and more generally, in the school. However, this budget discussion could have served as an opportunity for equalizing knowledge if Ms. Nichols would have directed the more knowledgeable parents to teach the less knowledgeable how to work with budgets and what the jargon meant. In such a case Sara would not have had to bear the burden of explaining, but could have focused on translating.

Although this specific incident only occurred once, I believe it has marked significance. Many schools answer the call for increased "empowerment"-oriented parent involvement activities by placing parents on budget committees. In the worst case scenario, as played out at McKay, it proved to be a particularly humiliating and alienating experience for parents. This incident illustrates parents' need for scaffolded support to empower them, that is, parents and parent representatives need to be provided with the opportunity to learn underlying skills like developing budgets, in addition to more general organizing skills.

Inhibiting the Seeds of Democratic Participation. The prescribed meeting agendas involved poorly structured participation activities and information dissemination, treated parents as passive receptacles, and pushed their needs aside. Furthermore, the minimal contact between administrators and parents left administrators unaware of parents' need for functional avenues of communication with them.

With no other avenues, parents relied on advisory council meetings as their primary opportunity to voice their concerns to the administration. The principal did not recognize this need, feeling rather that the Parent Center's separation benefited parents because they "can come in to talk to other parents without ever having to see authority. They can get the word of mouth there." However, since all the involved parents were relatively uninformed and unconnected to the school, "word of mouth" did not provide parents with much information or help them address specific concerns, nor could they build a power base themselves. Parents sought responsiveness from the school, and when they did not receive it, many left feeling that the school did not honor their concerns. Recently involved parent Reyna Buatista reported that she could not get other parents to attend meetings with her because they did not feel that anyone listened. Another parent complained:

> The meetings are supposed to be places where we learn what is going on and what is not happening, what needs to be done. And they didn't let us talk at all. So that's why I don't go to meetings anymore because I came and saw and I was outraged.

Since the parents did not meet at any other time as a group to discuss their concerns about their children and the school, the meetings became their only time to express themselves. Occasionally the administrators attempted to appease parents' concerns, but without the capacity and the commitment to follow through on meeting those needs, parents' concerns remained unaddressed. The following exchange exemplifies administrators' lack of responsiveness to parents' concerns.

***

Latina parent: Can the school help us? Kids go out in the rain at school or in the cold and get sick.

Vice Principal: They should wear sweats.

Parent: My son was punished for not wearing shorts.

Vice Principal: (no response)

***

Not only did administrators not help resolve parents' individual concerns, but their lack of responsiveness eroded parents' trust and confidence in voicing concerns.

Administrators' lack of follow through and feedback sent parents the message that their concerns were unimportant. The Title I coordinator expressed distress with the way an administrator handled a parent concern at an advisory meeting:

> He [the parent] wanted to know why his kid was being moved around so much, there didn't seem to be consistent education going on at this school.... The A.P.'s response was not helpful. It wasn't. Number one, his feelings weren't acknowledged, and then he was told that it wasn't the right forum, at a parent council meeting, which didn't seem appropriate because he was upset. This is a person who cares about his child. If you can't be upset in the parent council, then where are you going to get upset?

This incident serves as an example of the lack of attention to parents' concerns that occurred in parent meetings. Many other similar incidents occurred as well.

Throughout the year parents expressed considerable interest in the hiring of more truancy counselors. These counselors had traditionally called and visited the homes of habitually absent students. District cut-backs led to the termination of this position. Motivated by African American grandmother Mrs. Anderson's, expressed concern, parents

made strong requests to the principal to use extra Title I funds to buy the counselor's time. After the Title I coordinator announced that the district had provided the school with an extra $65,000, most of one parent advisory council meeting revolved around this issue. When the principal finally arrived at the meeting and parents expressed their proposal to him, he avoided giving a commitment. However, he seemed to have already decided how the money would be spent and replied to parents concerns by saying:

> I am in a good position because I know everything that is going on in this school and so I can talk about all the different ways the money is spent, whereas you can't possibly know all the things that are going on. You have to trust me.

Several months later Mr. Jones informed me, when I asked, that he had decided to engage the services of the truancy counselor for two days a week. However, parents were never informed of this decision, clearly indicating his lack of concern for including parents in decisions about the functioning of the school. Most importantly, he missed an opportunity to let them know that their input had an impact on the decision-making process.

These examples show multiple occurrences of parent-initiated deliberations being passed over or dismissed by administrators. One staff member felt that administrators consistently had not responded to parents concerns:

> I know that [parents have] been pushing for things, and many times they might feel that nobody's hearing them, especially like after school, that there might be a problem with the gang kids that are waiting on the other side of the bridge and there are kids going there, and then by the time the police goes there, they already left, or they're in the middle, and they, I don't know, but they were asking for police protection, and they felt...that nobody's listening to them. You know, there are little things like that, that I just tell them, that they need to continue talking and eventually somebody will listen.

The administrator did not value parents' concerns and opinions, which both prevented trusting and constructive relationships from developing and allowed political tensions and unequal relations to remain unaltered.

No Avenue for Feedback. When parent discussions occurred in the absence of administrators, no avenues of communication existed to ensure that administrators heard these concerns and addressed them. The Parent Center functioned as an island at the school; the deliberation occurring there in the absence of administrators was never

conveyed to them or to other school staff. The following example from a meeting illustrates parents' lack of connection to school decision-makers.

***

Latina parent: The people who work here should be more flexible. My daughter was very sick and the nurse accused her of lying. Nobody let me know that my daughter was sick. I had to spend the whole day at the clinic with her and it was very expensive. The people working at the school are supposed to be nice.

Another Latina parent: Why don't we bring the nurse to the meeting. Staff are not aware of what is going on because they don't come to the meetings.

Porter: You're right.

***

Following this interaction, no one wrote down the suggestions and no one volunteered to invite school staff. Nothing changed. No administrator was present to hear the recommendation and no one present held the role of liaison to the administration. As seen previously, parents felt that they had little power even when administrators were informed, as they appeared unresponsive. Parents began to doubt the school's good intentions.

The previous exchange exemplifies a situation where the seeds of empowerment, although planted by parents, could not grow without the confidence and skills to bring about fruition. As a result, coming to the Parent Center seemed like a waste of time to many parents. Nubia Ortiz explained her inability to convince other parents to attend the McKay parent meetings:

> Before any meeting, if I'm aware that there is one coming up, I go around telling my neighbors, "Hey, there's a meeting on such and such a day," but they said, "What's the use? They don't listen to us?" That's what they tell me.... That's why they don't want to come, and a lot of times they definitely can't come to the meetings, but other times they come but they've noticed that their voices are not heard.

Although the Parent Center remained parents' most viable avenue for communication with the school, without the connection between the center and the rest of the school, its value was limited. The lack of connection left parents distrusting the school. As one faculty member explained,

> I think that many times they [parents] feel that the school doesn't really tell them everything that goes on in the school. That we're hiding things from them.... So there's like a little distrust between the parents and the, I would say, the school personnel.

Parents' lack of solidarity and the lack of avenues for communication inhibited their ability to express their concerns to the school staff, leaving them feeling unvalued.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It must be stated that although rewarding interactions between parents and educators did exist at McKay, they were limited by a variety of factors and on the whole involved an unfortunately small group of people. A real commitment was demonstrated by some, particularly parent representative Sara Saucedo, who provided parents with a sense of belonging and some skills of participation. The seeds for democratic participation were planted by the diversity of the participating parents, the inclusive style of the parenting class, and parents' exposure to the socio-cultural knowledge of schooling transmitted in meetings. Among the few diverse participants an opportunity for the development of social networks, trust, and civic virtue existed.

Despite the hard work of the parent representatives, the diversity of involved parents, and the inclusiveness that Ms. Saucedo and the parenting classes fostered, democratic parent participation did not flourish at McKay. Parents were not supported in gaining participation skills or opportunities to organize in solidarity with one another. Opportunities for skill development could enhance efficacy, civic virtue, and increase horizontal relations between families and schools. In addition, were the school to honor parental input and renegotiate power with parents this would strengthen both the school and the community. However, without a receptive administration and structures for open communication in place, parental development cannot be effective. The lack of leadership capacity from both the administrators as well as the parent representatives inhibited meaningful parent involvement.

The structure of the school system itself fostered a hands-off approach, keeping administrators unaware of parents' needs. They received no incentives to become "caring" administrators: to foster parents' human growth, show empathy for them, take responsibility for addressing their concerns, or maintain a continuity of relationships with them (Beck, 1992). Administrators shirked their responsibility to address parents' concerns through meaningful deliberation. Furthermore, they repeatedly undermined parental power by individualizing parental concerns, thus perpetuating vertical relations with parents.

Within the sanctuary of the Parent Center, parents faced ritual-bound parent meetings that were allowed to continue because of administrative indifference and a lack of district support. Information dissemination rather than democratic deliberation dominated most parent meetings, despite parents' efforts to redirect them. The parent representatives' lack of organizing skills, coupled with an absence of avenues for communication between the Parent Center and the rest of the school, virtually silenced parents and maintained parents' position in a vertical power structure. Despite their best intentions, the parent representatives lacked the leadership skills to organize, unify, and mobilize parents at McKay. As a result, political and cultural tensions among parents and between parents and school staff persisted.

Does this data on the Parent Center leave us with any hope? McKay must face the challenges of enhancing parents' capacity through skill development and relationship building. All players lacked the skills to stimulate democratic engaging deliberation, which could have the potential of leading to a more responsive school. Parents lacked the skills to foster solidarity among themselves and to initiate and sustain meaningful deliberations with administrators and teachers. The administrators lacked the capacity—and possibly the will—to create opportunities for parental participatory skill development and engagement. They relied on traditional, middle class models of parent involvement, which preserved the school's power and vertical relations with families. Neither parents nor administrators had

access to external support or training, which could have helped them transform the unequal relations that existed between the school and community. Furthermore, superficial attempts to engage parents more substantively in activities like budgeting, revealed that not only do parents lack the skills to jump into these activities, but administrators lacked the skills to support substantive parental involvement.

The data from this study seem to clearly reveal that parental involvement in urban communities need scaffolded support. This could come from a facilitator who works as a liaison between parents and school staff to create a more supportive and inclusive school environment. Parents will learn best if these skills are modeled for them by a peer who engages them in horizontal relations allowing them to learn without the fear of being silenced, alienated, or embarrassed. In such circumstances parents could learn the explicit skills of participation, organizing and democratic engagement. As they develop these skills they will be able to act increasingly independently from their liaison and may even have the opportunity to scaffold support for new less experienced parents. This kind of scaffolded support could help create opportunities for deliberation among parents and between parents and staff. With time, strong school/community collaboration may be developed.

However, for such an effort to be successful, administrators need to have the will to honor, respect, and respond to parents' requests and contributions. As the data from McKay shows, committed parents and parent representatives have little power and receive few rewards when they face an unresponsive traditional-minded administration. The problem of unresponsive administrators is more complex than a transformation of will. Administrators receive little training, guidance or support in engaging parents and their communities. They too need scaffolded support. Little attention is paid to these issues in administrative credential programs and little support is given to administrators in large urban districts. Most administrators contact with their school districts comes as pressure to improve student performance and reduce drop-out and absentee rates. District reforms, like LEARN, may require parental membership on various committees and their vote on

specific policies, however, administrators receive little guidance in the ways to seek this kind of participation and more, importantly the kinds of training which parents need to make their presence on these committees meaningful. As a result, parent participation frequently functions as a rubber stamp to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, most districts do not reward or recognize administrators who successfully engage community members. Schools are not structured to allocate time for deliberation between parents and staff. Even open houses, the only formal time for interaction between parents and staff, only allow parents a few minutes to speak with a few teachers about their children. The inadequacy of these structures result in diminished opportunities for parents to demonstrate civic virtue by advocating on behalf of all children and families. Therefore, I suggest a reassessment of the training and support provided to district administrators.

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